

St Bede's Catholic School and Sixth Form College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	114328
Local Authority	Durham
Inspection number	325993
Inspection dates	22–23 January 2009
Reporting inspector	Georgiana Sale

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Voluntary aided
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	1379
Sixth form	278
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Richard Christon
Headteacher	Mrs Maureen Bates
Date of previous school inspection	1 May 2006
School address	Consett Road Lanchester Durham County Durham DH7 0RD
Telephone number	01207 520424
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Age group	11–18
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by five Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

St Bede's is a large 11 to 19 Roman Catholic school which became a specialist language college in 1998. A very small minority of students in the sixth form join in Year 12 from other schools. The school is located in the north west of County Durham and students come from a variety of social and economic backgrounds. There are few students in the school without English as their first language or from minority ethnic groups. The number of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is a third below the national average.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

St Bede's is an outstanding school. Since being judged to be satisfactory in 2006 it has improved rapidly because of the combined determination and hard work of governors, headteacher, staff and students to raise the bar.

Under the excellent leadership of the headteacher, supported by a highly effective governing body and a very strong management team, all aspects of the school have improved in quality to outstanding. The school also gives outstanding value for money. Standards are well above average and students of all abilities benefit from high quality teaching and exemplary care, support and guidance. In its quest to be the best the school is far from complacent. It is forward looking, self challenging and quick to put effective actions in place to resolve issues and meet students' needs. The widening curriculum and the rigorous use of systems to check students' progress against challenging targets have been key factors in driving up standards. The school is extremely well placed to continue to improve.

St Bede's is welcoming and inclusive; all students flourish and achieve outstandingly well. This is recognised by parents who, in their responses to the questionnaire, had a high level of agreement that their children do well at St Bede's. Many parents picked out the great influence of the headteacher in creating a school where the personal development of the students and their well being is as important as the achievement of high academic standards. Clear moral and ethical values underpin the life in the school and are understood and embraced by students and staff.

Students enter Year 7 with standards which are slightly above the national average, but by the end of Year 11 are well above national averages. In 2008, the school had its best ever results. The outstanding rise in standards can be shown by the proportion of students gaining five or more GCSEs, including English and mathematics, rising by 24% in the past four years. In 2008, the value added by the school in terms of students' progress placed St Bede's in the top 5% of all schools in the country. Students' outstanding achievement reflects their positive attitudes in wanting to learn, the outstanding curriculum and the high expectations of the teaching staff. The school's very strong emphasis on the individual is matched by excellent pastoral and academic care, support and guidance. This is especially so for the more vulnerable students who thrive.

Students have a good level of attendance and they speak with warmth and pride of the enjoyment they get from coming to school. Nearly all learn at least one modern foreign language and a high number from all year groups participate in extra curricular activities. They make a positive contribution not only to their local community, but also further afield. The school's excellent links with other agencies and its involvement in projects, often through the language college, give students a very good introduction to the global community. The students take part in events where they can experience and understand the richness of diverse society and the standards achieved by students ensure that they will be able to make a positive contribution to the society they enter. They leave Year 11 as articulate, mature young people with personal and academic skills that equip them well for adult life.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 1

Provision in the sixth form is outstanding and has improved markedly since the last inspection. The provision is very well led and managed as an integral part of the school; there is a high focus on improvement. Transition into the sixth form is effectively managed, both for the many students that stay on from the main school, and the increasing number of students who come from other schools.

Standards are above average. Students who join the sixth form from other schools make outstanding progress from their starting points. Likewise, the school's own data shows that students make outstanding progress overall by the end of Year 13. In 2008 the sixth form had its best overall results; 97% of the students gained A to E grades at A Level and nearly half gained A and B grades. All students gained an A to E grade in the vocational A Levels.

As in the main school the personal development and well-being of the students is outstanding as is their care, support and academic guidance. Challenging targets are set, and students' progress monitored closely. Swift action is taken to get students back on course if they fall behind in their work. Academic guidance is excellent within subject areas, and when students apply to university, other places of education or for employment.

Students have a wide choice of study and the school is working to expand the curriculum further. Lessons are well planned and structured but the tendency for some teachers to over direct the students constrains the opportunities for critical discussion and debate. Students valued the time allocated for personal research and commented on how they would welcome even more opportunities in lessons to learn independently. The school is considering ways to share effective practice.

What the school should do to improve further

- Broaden the methods of learning to ensure they meet the needs of all students in the sixth form.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 1

Standards at the end of Year 11 have improved dramatically year on year to well above average. A good example is the proportion of students gaining five A* to C passes at GCSE which in 2008 was 83%. The school has also been successful in raising the proportion of students gaining good passes in English and mathematics: since 2005 the overall figure has leapt by 16%. The number of other subjects which outperform the national average is growing with science, art, geography and physical education performing very well in 2008. Most students gain a qualification in a modern language at the end of Year 11. The proportion who gained a grade A* to C pass in 2008 was nearly double the national average. By the end of Year 9 students have made excellent progress and standards are well above those nationally. In 2008 unvalidated data show that over half the students gained the highest levels in English, mathematics and science. Data from the school's monitoring of students' progress indicate the overall upward trend in results is continuing.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Students' personal development and well being are outstanding. The quality has strengthened since the last inspection and is a key factor in the school's overall success and its growing popularity with parents and students in primary schools.

Excellent relationships at all levels and between all groups are a hallmark of the school's powerful ethos and make a great contribution to the quality of learning across the school. Students are very well mannered, respectful of others and friendly; they value and care for their peers. Overall attendance is good. Students are prompt to lessons, which they enjoy, and respect the school's rules. Behaviour is generally exemplary which students commented most favourably upon.

Students know how to lead a healthy lifestyle. They make healthy food choices and take plenty of exercise. Students say they feel safe and secure in school. They know bullying happens now and again, but comment 'we know how to report it and deal with it'. They praised the introduction of the 'Listening Post' as an anti-bullying measure. Students are eager to take on responsibility and are impressive ambassadors for their school. They know their voice is heard and valued. The Student Council has successfully tackled important matters including changes to school meals and behaviour on the buses. Students have a good knowledge of, and respect for, the beliefs of others and other cultural traditions. They show an excellent understanding and knowledge of the wider world, and the needs of others through their many fund-raising events. By the time they leave school they have very good skills in English and mathematics, excellent social and teamwork skills, and an ability for sustained hard work.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 1

The improvement in the overall quality of teaching and learning to outstanding has been a major factor in raising standards and moving the school forward. Although some variation in the quality on teaching was seen within subjects and key stages, most students benefit from consistently high quality teaching.

Teachers know their students very well. Excellent relationships ensure teachers and students work in partnership to make sure there are the right conditions in the classrooms for everyone to learn. The teachers' high expectations result in productive lessons, and well motivated students with high aspirations. Teachers use information about the students' abilities and targets to plan lessons and there is an excellent match of activities to students' needs. In those lessons where there was a high focus on practical activities, students were especially well motivated and involved.

The teachers have excellent subject knowledge enabling them to give a rich flavour of their subject and clear explanations which foster students' understanding. For example, students in Year 7 lesson made marked progress in speaking with good French and using interesting words to describe their opinions because of the teacher's enthusiasm and examples. Teachers' comments in lessons and on students' work ensure students know exactly where they are in their learning, and what they need to do to improve. In some lessons, particularly in science, French and geography, when students evaluated their own learning, they showed a very good awareness of points for development.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

The curriculum is outstanding. Since the last inspection, the school has successfully developed and extended the curriculum to provide students with a flexible, evolving range of opportunities, courses and choices which are increasingly tailored to individual needs. Good examples are the development of four learning pathways in Key Stage 4 and links to the world of work. While retaining a strong focus on academic routes, the school is diversifying to meet the needs of students who are looking to vocational courses. Together with excellent academic and pastoral guidance, this has led to outstanding achievement for students and a small but growing number gaining apprenticeships at the end of Year 11.

There is a clear emphasis on integrating skills into the curriculum through courses such as 'Learning to Learn' in Year 7 and the focus on additional support in literacy and numeracy for those who have some gaps in their knowledge. The school's exemplary practice in focussing on functional skills in Key Stage 4 has rightly been recognised as an element of good practice by the local authority. Homework extends the curriculum. A particularly strong feature is its use to give students the opportunity to carry out independent research which will be used in the next lesson.

The school makes creative use of links with outside partners to enrich the curriculum and to bring about innovations in learning. For example, the school is working with Durham University to support enterprise activities and is engaged in a project with the National Youth Theatre to develop the use of drama techniques in the learning of a modern foreign language. Students benefit well from the school's specialist status. The take-up of a modern language is high, with more than 85% learning French. The number of students taking two languages is increasing and a widening range of qualifications and accreditation is enabling greater access for students of all abilities.

The school extends its vision of developing the whole person by offering a wide range and number of extra-curricular opportunities, including sporting, language and arts based activities.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

The quality of both pastoral and academic care, guidance and support are equally outstanding. This is a major strength of the school which students and their parents rate very highly. The staff provide high quality role models of what caring for others means which is reflected in the similarly high quality of students' attitude.

The school dedicates considerable time and resources to ensuring students' welfare. Arrangements for safeguarding meet statutory requirements. Senior leaders are constantly monitoring the effectiveness of systems and taking action when needed. This results in excellent standards of behaviour.

Academic guidance is strong; the teachers regularly assess students' performance, provide students with feedback and review their targets. Staff are quick to identify underachievement and to bring students back on track through meetings with parents, mentoring, booster and catch-up classes. The support for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is exemplary and allows them to succeed.

Parents report that they valued the links with primary schools to ease the move for their children into Year 7. A particular success is the nurture group which provides a secure and supportive environment where vulnerable students in Year 7 develop confidence in learning. Very well planned guidance and caring support enables students to cope successfully through the transition from Key Stage 3 to 4. As part of the move from Key Stage 4 to the sixth form there are open evenings, visits, taster lessons, and one to one interviews supported by the transition coordinator, Connexions service and a number of key staff including the school chaplain. Sixth form students are given specific and detailed guidance on their applications for higher education.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

The leadership and management of the school are outstanding at all levels. The inspirational headteacher is the driving force behind the changes in the school and its success. The overwhelming sense that everyone shares her vision for St Bede's to be 'the best' reflects a level of teamwork, focus and momentum that are outstanding. The support staff make an excellent contribution and there is a strong 'one team' culture. The school is especially good at recognising and developing potential talent and building teams that work well together. As a result, there is a high degree of shared accountability and proven success in bringing about improvement. The continuing focus on sharing best practice has lifted the quality of teaching and been influential in enabling an increasing proportion of students to achieve extremely well.

Governance is strong. Governors are well informed and have a secure understanding of the school's performance. They have developed very good systems to hold the school to account.

Leadership of the language college is integrated well into the drive evident at whole school level. The increasing profile of the specialism is providing students not only with a broad choice of qualifications in modern languages, but is also raising standards and boosting achievement for most students.

The school has an accurate picture of its strengths and areas for development because it makes extremely effective use of a range of data to evaluate and analyse its performance. This is then used to take well focussed actions to bring about effective change. Given the highly successful steps taken to raise standards and the very positive impact of action also on students' personal development, the school has an excellent capacity to improve further.

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Annex A

Inspection judgements

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	School Overall	16-19
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Overall effectiveness

How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?	1	1
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well being?	1	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1	1

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	1	1
The standards ¹ reached by learners	1	1
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	1	1
How well learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make progress	1	1

¹Grade 1 - Exceptionally and consistently high; Grade 2 - Generally above average with none significantly below average; Grade 3 - Broadly average to below average; Grade 4 - Exceptionally low.

Personal development and well-being

How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	1	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1	
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	1	
The attendance of learners	2	
The behaviour of learners	1	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	1	
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	1	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of learners' needs?	1	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1	1

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	1	1
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	1	
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	1	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1	1
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	1	
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	1	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	1	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	1	
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes	Yes
Does this school require special measures?	No	
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No	

Annex B**Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection**

26 January 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of St Bede's Catholic School and Sixth Form College, Durham, DH7 0RD

Thank you for the warm welcome you gave me and the other inspectors when we visited your school recently. We enjoyed meeting you and your teachers and visiting some of your lessons.

We have judged St Bede's to be an outstanding school. It is a very special place because of the exceptional care and support that it provides. As well as helping you to achieve excellent results in examinations and make extremely good progress, the school helps you to become responsible, caring young people.

We were very impressed with your behaviour, the respect that you show each other and the efforts you make to help those less fortunate than yourselves. You told us how much you enjoy your lessons and how friendly and supportive the teachers are. We were pleased to see your enthusiastic participation in all aspects of school life and can see why you enjoy the many after school clubs and other activities that the school offers you. The sixth form students set an excellent example for younger ones. You all work hard in lessons and it is also good to see that you involve yourselves in a wide range of activities that help the school and the community.

You have an inspirational headteacher and excellent staff who lead and manage the school well. Your parents really care about your education and are represented by a very good governing body who support the headteacher in making sure you get the very best.

Although there are so many excellent things about your school there is always room for some improvement. We have asked the school to look for ways to make the teaching and learning in the sixth form even better – especially to help sixth formers to learn more on their own. I know you will be keen to share your ideas with the school council and your teachers.

I wish you every success in your future careers, and a happy and fulfilled life.

Yours sincerely

Georgiana Sale

Lead inspector